

THE COIN CONUNDRUM: THE FUTURE OF COUNTERINSURGENCY AND U.S. LAND POWER

Thomas R. Mockaitis



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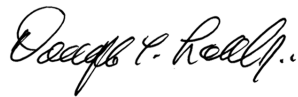
FOREWORD

Counterinsurgency (COIN) has once again become the subject of contentious debate within the U.S. Army. Its supporters insist that the new approach enshrined in the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, led coalition forces to turn the tide of the campaign in Iraq. Critics argue that the surge and the end of the Shia uprising, not COIN, led to the dramatic decline in violence from 2006-2009. The failure of the new approach in Afghanistan, they claim, supports their argument that expeditionary COIN does not work. How this debate gets resolved could have significant implications for U.S. Army force structure in a time of shrinking defense budgets.

The author, Dr. Thomas R. Mockaitis, considers what role, if any, COIN should play in the Army of the future. He examines the U.S. military's historical experience with intrastate conflict as background for understanding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He then reviews the current debate over COIN as a prelude to suggesting the options facing the U.S. military. Based upon contemporary threat assessments and current U.S. military capabilities, he concludes that COIN should remain a core task of an enhanced U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), which could train conventional soldiers in COIN tactics in the event that a large expeditionary COIN mission becomes necessary.

Dr. Mockaitis concludes that an enhanced Special Operations capability need not adversely affect the Army's ability to prepare for conventional war-fighting. Efforts to improve the tooth-to-tail ratio of combat units, the increased use of labor-saving technology, and reliance on contractors to perform support func-

tions during missions can offset any reallocation of forces to SOCOM. In today's world, unconventional threats abound, and they will remain prevalent for the foreseeable future. The U.S. Army must prepare to counter these threats while retaining its ability to fight and win conventional wars.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute and
U.S. Army War College Press

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THOMAS R. MOCKAITIS is a Professor of History at DePaul University. He conducts international presentations about terrorism and counterterrorism (CT) for various programs with other experts through the Center for Civil-Military Relations at the Naval Post-Graduate School. He was the 2004 Eisenhower Chair at the Royal Military Academy of the Netherlands. He has also lectured at the U.S. National Intelligence University, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) School, the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and the Canadian Forces Staff College; he has presented papers at the Pearson Peacekeeping Center (Canada), the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (UK), and the Austrian National Defense Academy. A frequent media commentator on terrorism and security matters, Dr. Mockaitis has appeared on Public Television, National Public Radio, BBC World News, all major Chicago TV stations, and various local radio programs. He appears regularly as a terrorism expert for WGN-TV News. He is the 2008 recipient of the DePaul Liberal Arts and Sciences Cortelyou-Lowery Award for Excellence in Teaching, Scholarship, and Service. Dr. Mockaitis is the author of *Soldiers of Misfortune?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2014); *Avoiding the Slippery Slope: Mounting Interventions* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2013); *The Iraq War: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO/Greenwood: 2012); *Osama bin Laden: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2010); *Iraq and the Challenge of Counterinsurgency* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008); *The "New" Terrorism: Myths and Reality* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007); *The Iraq War: Learning from*

the Past, Adapting to the Present, and Preparing for the Future (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007); *Peacekeeping and Intrastate Conflict: the Sword or the Olive Branch?* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-Imperial Era* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 1995); and *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-1960* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1990). He co-edited *Grand Strategy and the War on Terrorism* with Paul Rich (London, UK: Frank Cass, 2003); and *The Future of Peace Operations: Old Challenges for a New Century* with Erwin Schmidt (a special issue of *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, London, UK: Taylor and Francis 2004). He is an editor of *Small Wars and Insurgencies* and has also published numerous articles on unconventional conflict. His most recent work, *Conventional and Unconventional War: A History of Conflict in the Modern World*, is forthcoming from ABC-Clio/Praeger. Dr. Mockaitis earned his B.A. in European history from Allegheny College, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in modern British and Irish history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

SUMMARY

The debate over counterinsurgency (COIN), seemingly dormant since the end of the Vietnam War, has been rekindled by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the 2006 publication of the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, practitioners and scholars have argued over the efficacy of COIN. Supporters insist that the new approach outlined in the manual led to the creation of a strategy that defeated the Iraqi insurgents between 2006-2009. Critics argue that the surge of 30,000 additional troops, robust conventional operations, and the end of the Shia uprising – not a new COIN strategy – caused violence in Iraq to decline dramatically. They point to the failure of the campaign in Afghanistan as further evidence that COIN does not work. In an era of declining Pentagon budgets, this debate has significant implications for U.S. land forces.

This monograph considers the place of COIN in U.S. Army doctrine, training, and resource allocation. It begins with a brief overview of the U.S. military's historical experience combating insurgency before considering the recent campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The monograph then examines in detail the contemporary, scholarly, and professional debate over the efficacy of COIN and its place in U.S. defense planning. Recognizing that consideration of this important issue must be grounded in an examination of the contemporary security environment, the monograph reviews official threat assessments. It then considers the current U.S. military capacity for addressing identified threats. That capacity includes force structure, doctrine, and learning institutions.

Building on this analytical framework, this monograph considers four options vis-à-vis COIN. The Army could revert to the post-Vietnam Era approach, focusing on conventional war and relegating COIN to a small Special Operations Command (SOCOM). It could reconfigure its force structure to focus on unconventional threats. It could, instead, try to train two-speed soldiers capable of conducting conventional and unconventional operations; or, it could keep COIN as a core function of an enhanced SOCOM with the capability to train conventional forces in unconventional tactics should a large expeditionary COIN mission be deployed. This monograph concludes that the forth option best equips the Army for the contemporary security environment. It then makes specific recommendations for implementing this option and suggests the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF)-Philippines as the model for future COIN campaigns. Finally, the monograph maintains that an enhanced special operations forces (SOF) capability will not adversely affect preparation for conventional war-fighting. Improving the conventional forces' tooth-to-tail ratio, continuing to develop labor-saving technologies, and relying on contractors to perform support functions can offset reallocation of personnel to SOCOM.

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INTRODUCTION

No area of American military theory and practice has been more contentious than counterinsurgency (COIN). The experience of Vietnam made the U.S. Army leery of conducting direct operations in support of states threatened by insurgency or civil war. For the quarter-century following the fall of Saigon, the United States avoided such conflicts. The United States provided aid to Colombia in its war with Marxist insurgents, supported the Contras in their campaign to overthrow the Sandinistas in El Salvador, and backed the government of the Philippines against a 1989 coup attempt. None of these missions included combat troops. Only in El Salvador did the U.S. military become involved in a protracted COIN campaign, and then only with a very small advisory mission. Its doctrine assiduously avoided including COIN or any other form of unconventional conflict as a core task. The creation of Special Operations Command (SOCOM) in 1987 made such avoidance easier, because COIN could be designated a specialized task relegated to Special Operations Forces (SOF).

This approach served the U.S. Army and Marine Corps well until the invasion of Iraq. As the Americans arrived in Baghdad, the government collapsed. U.S. soldiers faced an internal security situation for which they were unprepared. By the summer of 2004, a full-blown insurgency rocked the country. The

extent and complexity of the threat precluded its being handled by SOF alone. Soldiers from all combat arms and support services found themselves deployed on internal security duties. Almost instantly, COIN went from being the dirtiest word in the military lexicon to the hottest topic in the armed services. The Pentagon drafted a new joint U.S. Army/Marine Corps COIN manual, while training and education courses embraced the once-taboo subject. The effort seemed to pay off as the Anbar Awakening, along with the Surge, turned the corner on the insurgency in 2007. At about the same time, the U.S. military in Afghanistan realized that its counterterrorism strategy, focused on killing and capturing terrorists, was not working and switched to COIN.

This apparent infatuation with COIN did not last long. Within the Army, a debate arose over whether COIN had really been as successful in Iraq as it appeared. Critics claimed that conventional methods and changing circumstances, not a new approach to unconventional conflict, had improved the security situation in Iraq. The debate intensified when Baghdad proved incapable of consolidating these gains after the American withdrawal. Far from being defeated, the insurgents roared back as a newly constituted entity, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which swept aside an Iraqi Army trained and equipped at great expense by the United States. Meanwhile, the debate over COIN continued, personified by General David H. Petraeus who supported it wholeheartedly and General George W. Casey, Jr. who argued for a proper balance between conventional and unconventional capabilities.¹

The argument has continued over the past several years, waged by academics and soldiers alike in a man-

ner that has produced more heat than light. When the dust settles, the Army will find itself in the same place it has been for most of the post-Cold War era — on the horns of a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, serious conventional threats exist, and the military must be prepared to meet them. On the other, insurgencies and insurgent-like conflicts refuse to go away no matter how difficult soldiers find them. These inescapable facts should change the nature of the debate from the simplistic question of whether the Army should concentrate on conventional or unconventional operations, to the more nuanced consideration of the degree to which its forces should train and equip for each type of conflict.

The best approach to deciding the optimal mix of conventional and unconventional forces, doctrine, and training is to consider the U.S. Army's experience of COIN in light of the current scholarly and professional debate on the subject. The lessons of that experience can then be weighed against a realistic assessment of today's threats and tomorrow's risks. It should then be possible to consider the options facing the U.S. Army and decide which one(s) allow it to develop land forces best suited to protecting the security and interests of the United States and its allies.

DEFINING TERMS AND SEEKING CLARITY

Insurgency.

Defining insurgency and COIN has always been difficult, but the evolution of these activities over the past 2 decades has made that task even harder. During the anti-colonial struggles of the post-World War II era, insurgency was defined as a movement

to overthrow an existing government from within a country through a combination of subversion, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare.² This definition accurately described groups like the National Liberation Front (*Front de Liberation Nationale* or FLN), which ousted the French from Algeria in 1962; or the Malayan Peoples Liberation Army, which the British battled from 1948 to 1960; as well as a host of other revolutionary movements that sprung up in Africa and Asia following the Second World War.

During the post-colonial era, however, it became clear that not all insurgencies unfolded in such a straightforward way and ended in such a definitive manner as the classic campaigns. The Marxist insurgency waged by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) lasted half a century before the group signed a peace accord with the government in 2016. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) engaged the British for almost 30 years before the conflict ended in a negotiated settlement. These and other cases have led scholars to create the term “chronic insurgency.” Chronic insurgencies not only take a very long time to resolve; they often end in something less than victory for one side or the other. In these conflicts, insurgents are often content to carve out living space and set up a shadow government within it. The Taliban would like to regain control of Afghanistan, but it will settle for occupying and ruling part of the country.³ In some cases, chronic insurgencies degenerate into criminality, and in others, criminal groups behave like chronic insurgencies governing spaces in which state sovereignty does not exist.⁴

The rise of al-Qaeda, with its territorial base in Afghanistan and a global network of cells and affiliated

organizations, led several scholars to conceptualize the terrorist threat as a global insurgency. One expert created a new term to describe the organization/movement. In her statement to a Congressional committee on February 3, 2004, National War College Professor Lani Kass suggested the term “pansurgency” to describe the al-Qaeda phenomenon. “We’re faced with a new strategic equation,” she stated, “an insurgency of global proportions—what I’d call a PANS-URGENCY—meaning a networked, transnational movement, aimed at overthrowing values, cultures, and societies by means of terrorism, subversion, and armed conflict.”⁵

While it may be useful to conceptualize al-Qaeda and similar threats in such terms, most insurgencies occur within a specific locale. Even if they have an international dimension, their center of gravity is usually in a specific place. Al-Qaeda has a headquarters of sorts in the tribal area of Pakistan. Al-Shabaab is affiliated with al-Qaeda, but it concentrates its operations in Somalia and has been able to strike only at neighboring Kenya and Uganda. Boko Haram has sworn allegiance to ISIS as the new Caliphate, but it operates almost exclusively in Nigeria and neighboring countries. The nature of insurgency has thus evolved, but perhaps not as much as the proponents of the terms “chronic insurgency” and “pansurgency” suggest.

Counterinsurgency (COIN).

Like the conflicts it seeks to combat, COIN has also evolved. In the era of colonial warfare, the Europeans described such operations as “imperial policing” or “small wars,” a term also used by the U.S. Marine Corps to describe its operations in Latin America and

the Caribbean during the 1920s and 1930s.⁶ The term “counterinsurgency” came into vogue after the Second World War and referred to combating rebellions. Threatened states took different approaches to COIN with varying degrees of success. All approaches, however, involved two broad categories of activity: 1. Efforts to address the causes of unrest upon which the insurgency fed, often referred to as “winning hearts and minds”; and 2. Counter-guerrilla operations.

Today, the U.S. Department of Defense defines COIN succinctly as “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.”⁷ Attacking causes of unrest might entail improving the quality of life of ordinary people through economic and social activities and/or engaging in political reform, such as granting local autonomy. Countering insurgent guerrillas involves small units operating on timely, accurate intelligence. Ideally, the elements of COIN work synergistically: reform induces support for the government by erstwhile disaffected people who provide the security forces with information on the whereabouts of the insurgents. This information enables the military and police to use force in a selective and focused manner. The two sides of the campaign must be coordinated through the effective mechanism of civil-military cooperation.

Unlike its European counterparts, the United States has virtually always conducted COIN operations in support of an allied government. Only in the case of the Philippine insurrection at the turn of the 20th century was the U.S. Government under attack. This tendency to conduct COIN on behalf of others has led one analyst to create a new term to describe the large-scale operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. At a June 2010 conference, National War College Profes-

sor Harvey Rishikof introduced the phrase “expeditionary counterinsurgency,” which he said several of his students had been using in online discussions for one of his courses.⁸ The term has been widely accepted as an apt description of missions in which the United States not only advises a threatened state, but also bears much of the responsibility for conducting the COIN campaign on its behalf. “Expeditionary COIN” has become the focus of an intense, often acrimonious debate among academics and practitioners. Some critics insist such operations have never really succeeded. Others maintain that even if it has sometimes worked, expeditionary COIN is not worth its cost in blood and treasure. They have also tended to equate all COIN with expeditionary COIN, ignoring those cases in which different, smaller-scale approaches have been effective. Resolving this debate is a necessary prequel to deciding what human and material resources the Army should devote to preparing for future COIN campaigns.

Doctrine and Strategy.

The terms “doctrine” and “strategy” are so basic to military operations that defining them should be a matter of stating the obvious for any soldier or student of war. Unfortunately, much of the criticism of COIN rests on a mistaken conflation of these two concepts.⁹ Doctrine refers to the “Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives.” The official definition includes the important caveat that doctrine “is authoritative but requires judgment in application.”¹⁰ Strategy is “a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve the-

ater, national, and/or multinational objectives.”¹¹ Put another way, strategy is the application of doctrine to a specific situation. While bad doctrine usually results in poor strategy, good doctrine does not automatically produce good strategy. “Judgment in application” is necessary to turn principles into plans. Under some circumstances, even a good strategy derived from sound doctrine will not produce victory. Some wars, conventional or unconventional, cannot be won. Unfortunately, critics frequently equate the failure of a specific COIN campaign with the inefficacy of COIN doctrine. Before examining the scholarly and professional debates on COIN, however, it is necessary to review the experience of the U.S. military with this most difficult type of warfare.

COIN, AMERICAN STYLE

Frontier Warfare.

Because the United States never had a formal empire, its military has had less experience with COIN than have those of the European imperial powers. Although the United States has engaged in a number of campaigns, these missions occurred over too broad a span of time to allow for the formation of a distinctly American approach to this type of conflict and its orderly transmission to successive generations of soldiers. Victory in the Second World War, achieved as a result of abundant resources and manpower with the application of massive firepower, confirmed the efficacy of what Russell Weigley called “the American way of war.” This approach produced an awesome conventional military establishment, but one ill-suited to COIN.¹²

Contrary to popular belief, though, American Armed Forces had engaged in unconventional conflict long before they fought conventional wars. English colonists organized into ranger units battled Native Americans and French Canadians during the 17th and 18th centuries. These irregular units played an important role in both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. Companies of backwoods riflemen and local militias supported Continental regulars in many engagements during the War for Independence. This ranger tradition forms what John Grenier describes as the “first American way of war.”¹³ After American independence, irregular warfare continued on the American frontier throughout much of the 19th century. Frontier warfare, however, differed from modern COIN in one key respect. Rangers had no need to exercise restraint in order to win hearts and minds. Indeed, extirpative warfare, destruction of crops and villages, and the slaughter of native peoples characterized frontier warfare.¹⁴

The Philippines and Latin America.

The U.S. military’s first exposure to modern COIN came in the Philippines following the Spanish American War. After liberating the territory from Spain, the United States decided to continue occupying it, replacing the Spaniards as the islands’ new colonial master. The guerrillas who had fought for independence soon engaged the Americans. From 1899 to 1902, insurgents led by Emilio Aguinaldo conducted an insurgency to drive out the new occupiers. Although American forces did employ draconian measures and at times used excessive force to combat the insurgents, they defeated Aguinaldo by devising and imple-

menting a comprehensive strategy, combining what would later be called civil affairs (CA) projects to win popular support with small-unit, anti-guerrilla operations. U.S. Army contingents in local villages built schools, improved sanitation, and inoculated children against smallpox, while American civilian administrators doled out patronage jobs to loyal Filipinos.¹⁵ U.S. forces divided the region threatened by insurgents into operational areas and sub-areas, allowing the troops stationed there to get to know the terrain and the local people. Small American units aided by Filipino scouts who spoke the local language pursued the guerrillas.¹⁶ This strategy allowed approximately 24,000 American troops to defeat an insurgent movement that may have numbered 80,000 at its peak.¹⁷

While the U.S. Army first practiced COIN in the Philippines, the U.S. Marines learned it in Latin America. Since it had built the Panama Canal at the turn of the 20th century, the United States had come to regard Central America and the islands of the Caribbean as its exclusive security zone. This assertion of American power led to interventions by the Marines in several regional countries. In 1915, they occupied Haiti, where they remained until 1934. The following year, they occupied its neighbor, the Dominican Republic, staying in that country until 1924. From 1928 to 1929, Marine Captain Merritt “Red Mike” Edson pursued Nicaraguan insurgents led by Augusto Sandino along the Rio Coco in Nicaragua. In all of these missions, the Marines conducted operations far closer to COIN than to conventional war.

The Marine Corps preserved its Latin American experience in the now-famous *Small Wars Manual* published in 1940. The manual showed a keen appreciation of what it called “small wars,” which would

later be dubbed “insurgencies.” “The application of purely military measures may not, by itself, restore peace and orderly government,” the book counseled, “because the fundamental causes of the conditions of unrest may be economic, political, or social.” From this premise followed the conclusion that in such campaigns, “military measures to be applied must be of secondary importance.”¹⁸ In addition to explaining the unique nature of insurgent-style conflict, the *Small Wars Manual* contained a wealth of information on a broad range of relevant subjects, including proper treatment of civilians and small-unit, counter-guerrilla tactics. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War II so altered the mission of the Marine Corps that it forgot its own COIN experience. Most leathernecks deploying to Vietnam in the 1960s did not even know the manual existed.

Vietnam.

Fifty years after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War continues to be a subject of intense debate among historians. Almost every aspect of the conflict has been analyzed and disputed.¹⁹ The critics even disagree as to precisely what type of war Americans were fighting in Southeast Asia. Many of those who insist the United States should not have gone to Vietnam in the first place, as well as some of those who consider it a just war waged badly, view the conflict as an anti-colonial insurgency that the large-scale conventional American military was ill-suited to fight. The failure of this mission led the U.S. Army to conclude that COIN campaigns should be assiduously avoided. Closer examination of the Vietnam War, however, reveals it to have been a far more complex phenomenon than either its critics or supporters have appreciated.

Vietnam was a hybrid war with a conventional and an unconventional dimension. Given its structure and commitment to firepower and maneuver, the U.S. military understandably focused on the conventional side. Unfortunately, it also used conventional means to counter the unconventional threat posed by the National Front, commonly known as the Viet Cong. With too few troops to conduct a grassroots COIN campaign, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) that it supported, engaged in search-and-destroy operations. Ground forces transported by helicopter would fix Viet Cong units so that they could be destroyed by artillery and airpower. This approach had two serious shortcomings. First, U.S. and ARVN forces could clear but not hold territory. As soon as they left, the insurgents returned. Second, the application of massive firepower killed a lot of civilians, increasing their distrust of the government and its American backers and encouraging them to support the Viet Cong.

Some officers took issue with conventional tactics and argued for a different approach to countering the insurgency. Marine Corps Major General Victor Krulak advocated for “pacification,” a strategy that would replace search-and-destroy with “clear and hold.” He insisted that the MACV must shift its attention from the Central Highlands to the Mekong Delta and the coastal plain, where 90% of South Vietnamese lived. Krulak created Combined Action Platoons (CAPs), each with a Marine rifle section (12-15 men) joined to a local militia platoon (approximately 30 men) to defend threatened villages.²⁰ In 1967, the United States also instituted Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), an umbrella pro-

gram for economic and social improvement projects. Pacification employed sound COIN principles, but it was not a panacea; nor is it clear that applying it more extensively earlier in the war would have produced victory.

Whatever the merits of pacification, MACV commander General William Westmoreland employed it only on a limited scale, deeming North Vietnamese and Viet Cong conventional operations to be a greater threat to Saigon than insurgency. The Tet Offensive of 1968 indicates that his fears were not as unfounded as his critics have claimed. Westmoreland's successor, General Creighton Abrams, applied pacification on a broader scale, adding amnesty for insurgents and linking the COIN effort with the Phoenix Program, which assassinated National Front leaders. This change in strategy did produce notable results, but it weakened, without destroying, the Viet Cong leadership.²¹

Pacification suffered from two fatal flaws: it required more troops than the United States was willing to commit, and it could not compensate for the lack of support the Saigon government had among its own people. A 1967 Pentagon study determined that a nationwide pacification program would have required 167,000 combat troops; at its peak, MACV had only 80,000.²² At the end of the day, the United States could not save the Saigon government from itself. The cost of the war in blood and treasure had become unacceptable to the American people. Just how weak the Saigon government really was soon became apparent. Following American withdrawal in 1973, the country fell to the North Vietnamese in just 2 years.

The proper conclusion to draw from the conflict should have been that even a good strategy like pacification would not save a government that refuses to

engage in meaningful reform to win the support of its own disaffected people. The armed forces of one state cannot by themselves win the hearts and minds of the people in another. The U.S. Army, however, drew a different conclusion: COIN itself was a bad idea. The political establishment agreed. In a televised address to the American people on November 3, 1969, Richard Nixon articulated the doctrine that would bear his name. "We shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments," Nixon told a press conference, "but we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense."²³ Out of this statement developed the policy of "foreign aid for internal defense," under which the American military would provide small advisory missions rather than large troop deployments to assist governments threatened by insurgency. "No more Vietnams" became a Pentagon mantra. The creation of SOCOM in 1987 made it easy for the Regular Army to treat COIN as specialized task, and not its concern.

El Salvador.

The test of the new policy came less than a decade after the United States left Vietnam. In 1980, opposition groups united to form the *Fabrundo Marti National Liberation Front* (FMLN) and launched an insurgency against the Salvadoran government. In a country of 4.7 million people, in which 1% of the population owned 70% of the land, the FMLN enjoyed popular support among the urban poor and impoverished peasants.²⁴ The FMLN had an estimated 12,000 fighters, and the Salvadoran Army had approximately 15,000 sol-

diers.²⁵ Ill equipped, badly led, and filled with demoralized conscripts, the Salvadoran Armed Forces performed so poorly against the insurgents that by 1983 the government faced defeat. Having just seen the pro-American regime in Nicaragua fall to the Marxist Sandinistas, the administration of Ronald Reagan did not intend to sit by and watch another Latin American country become Communist.

The Reagan administration realized, however, that neither Congress nor the American people favored a large-scale U.S. deployment. Only a modest effort would be tolerated, and even that would face opposition because of the Salvadoran government's horrendous human rights record. Aid to the embattled regime took three forms: supplying the Salvadoran Armed Forces with equipment, training its officers in the United States and Panama, and deploying a small advisory team to El Salvador. Congress limited the size of the U.S. Military Advisory Group to 55 and prohibited it from going into the field with the Salvadorans. The Reagan administration, however, found ways to circumvent the limitation, deploying as many as 150 advisors by 1984, many of them SOF "A" teams (12-man units) to train the Salvadoran Army in COIN.²⁶

The American effort seemed to be working. With the benefit of U.S. equipment and training, the Salvadoran Army became more effective. Helicopters enabled its troops to deploy to remote areas rapidly and apply consistent pressure on the FMLN, forcing the insurgents to revert to small-unit guerrilla tactics. By the end of the 1980s, the organization had been weakened and the Salvadoran government had grown more conciliatory under U.S. pressure. This change in circumstances made it possible for the United Nations to broker talks that eventually led to a peace settle-

ment. The FMLN became a political party, which went on to win an election and govern El Salvador. More than a quarter-century later, a recurrence of armed conflict seems unlikely.

The outcome of the Salvadoran civil war has led military and academic analysts to herald it as a sterling example of what a small-footprint advisory mission can accomplish and to juxtapose it against the large-scale, unsuccessful missions in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. David Ucko, however, has raised serious concerns about interpreting the conflict as a good example of successful COIN. Material aid was probably more important to the Salvadoran military than COIN strategy and tactics. U.S. efforts to compel the government and its armed forces to improve their human rights record, generally regarded as crucial to successful COIN, had limited success. However, even with the equipment the United States provided, the Salvadoran military could not defeat the insurgents. The negotiated settlement, Ucko argues, owed more to the end of the Cold War, which led Moscow to withdraw support for the FMLN and made it possible for Washington to make aid to the Salvadoran government contingent upon better behavior, than it did to the success of the U.S. Military Advisory Mission.²⁷ His analysis serves as a reminder that, since each campaign is unique, trying to apply the “lessons” of one to another will always be problematic. The key to learning from the past is to distill broad principles from campaigns, not to look for precise templates.

Iraq and the Resurgence of U.S. COIN.

The decade between the end of the Salvadoran civil war and the invasion of Iraq saw no appreciable change in U.S. COIN doctrine. During the 1990s,

however, the Army became involved in a variety of unconventional activities and incorporated them in its doctrine under the new category, "Operations Other than War." As instructed by the 1993 version of Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations Explained*, the Army might undertake complex, sensitive operations ranging from:

support to U.S., state, and local governments, disaster relief, nation assistance, and drug interdiction to peacekeeping, support for insurgencies and counter-insurgencies, non-combatant evacuation and peace enforcement.²⁸

COIN was in the mix, but clearly not the priority as the U.S. military focused on humanitarian interventions and peace operations.

As it soon became clear, though, peace enforcement looked a lot like COIN.²⁹ The experience of Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo left the military and the country leery of interventions in civil conflicts, which might lead to protracted missions with open-ended commitments. Then-President George W. Bush had campaigned on a promise to avoid "nation building." The 9/11 terrorist attacks dramatically changed the security environment and necessitated invading Afghanistan. Saddam Hussein had been a manageable nuisance since the Gulf War of 1991, and the Bush administration never succeeded in making more than a tenuous connection between him and the threat of terrorism. In the climate of heightened anxiety following 9/11, however, even a small risk that the Iraqis had or might acquire weapons of mass destruction seemed unacceptable.

As much as the Bush administration wished to invade Iraq, though, it still wanted to avoid nation building. The Pentagon thus planned a rapid drive

to Baghdad, exploiting the vast American advantage in technology and firepower, followed by a hand-over to a new democratic Iraqi government and the timely withdrawal of U.S. forces. The planners forgot, however, that all occupations fall subject to a simple rule: you break it, you buy it. The assumption that the thousands of Iraqi bureaucrats and civil servants who ran the country would remain at their jobs waiting for the United States to usher in a new government proved wildly optimistic. The Iraqi government collapsed, widespread looting destroyed much of what remained of the country's fragile infrastructure, and in the power vacuum arose a complex and intransigent insurgency, which U.S. forces had not planned for or were prepared to counter.

Most analysts, as well many of the men and women who fought in Iraq, refer to a lost year from the end of major hostilities in May 2003, through the spring of 2004. During that period, the military and its civilian counterpart, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), not only failed to counter the growing insurgency, but took actions that made it worse. The CPA decided to disband the Iraqi armed forces without compensation and to exclude former Ba'ath Party members from holding office, thus adding to unemployment, which reached 67 percent.³⁰ These ill-advised moves embittered Iraqis, as did an over-reliance on conventional methods, which killed innocent civilians. Heavily armed, often-undisciplined private contractors who used force with even less discrimination added to the popular outrage, which fueled the insurgency. American forces soon faced a Shia uprising, a Sunni insurgency, and an international terrorist campaign perpetrated by the al-Qaeda affiliate, "al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers," commonly known as "al-Qaeda in Iraq."

As the conflict intensified, American forces and policymakers discovered—or rediscovered—effective COIN strategies and tactics. In November 2005, the White House revealed its *Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, which embraced the principles of “clear, hold, and build.”³¹ American and Iraqi forces would clear areas of insurgents, occupy the liberated areas, and build physical infrastructure and governing institutions to prevent the insurgents from returning. Provincial Reconstruction Teams were established to oversee these development projects. U.S. soldiers and Marines adopted small-unit tactics, and the United States spent billions training and equipping a new Iraqi Army and police force.

A doctrinal revolution accompanied the changes on the ground. In 2006, the Pentagon produced its first new COIN manual in decades. FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, contains a wealth of theoretical information on insurgency and COIN. It begins with a clear delineation of the types of insurgency and a historical overview of the phenomenon, outlines established principles for combating insurgents, and then discusses how these principles must be adapted to contemporary circumstances. The manual presents five “Contemporary Imperatives of Counterinsurgency” to guide the creation of an effective strategy: “Manage Information and Expectations. . . . Use the Appropriate Level of Force. . . . Learn and Adapt. . . . Empower the Lowest Levels. . . . Support the Host Nation.”³² General David Petraeus, who had commanded the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq, was the driving force behind the effort to produce the new manual. Petraeus and his supporters represented an emerging school of thought advocating COIN as a core U.S. Army task.

In addition to this change in approach, several developments helped turn the tide of the war in Iraq. In late-2006, American troops in Anbar Province began working with local Sheiks to combat the foreign *mujahedeen* of al-Qaeda in Iraq, whom many Iraqis considered a greater threat to their way of life than coalition forces. The United States paid the Sheiks a monthly remittance and trained former insurgents to be police officers. Just as the Anbar Awakening was getting under way, President Bush authorized the deployment of approximately 30,000 additional troops to Iraq, bringing peak U.S. strength to 187,900 in 2008.³³ Then in August 2007, Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr declared a unilateral ceasefire, which he renewed in 2008, thus ending the Shia uprising. All of these factors combined to produce a steady decline in U.S. casualty rates. Conditions improved so much that in 2009, the United States could begin to draw down its forces significantly and to withdraw its remaining combat troops by the agreed upon deadline of December 2011.

Given the dramatic turnaround in the course of the insurgency during 2007, readers may wonder why debates over the new Iraq strategy have been so intense. By all indicators, COIN appears to have worked. Several factors make such a simplistic conclusion problematic. So many things came together in 2007; determining which one or what combination of them proved decisive is very difficult. Supporters of COIN can reasonably argue that the new doctrine made it possible to integrate the increased assets and fortuitous occurrences into a winning strategy. Critics can just as easily claim that, combined with the increasing number of trained Iraqi forces and the end of the Shia uprising, the surge made it possible for the coalition to employ more conventional forces in destroying

insurgents worn down by 4 years of war. They might also add that since Iraq has fragmented and ISIS has arisen from the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the entire occupation was a dismal failure. The optimists could retort that the rise of ISIS and the breakup of Iraq resulted from the failure of the Shia-led government to consolidate the victory after American forces left. Unfortunately, resolving any or all of these debates will not answer the question of whether expeditionary COIN actually works. Failure of a campaign does not equate to the inefficacy of a doctrine. The Iraqis had to consolidate the U.S. victory, and their failure to do so does not detract from the American success.

COINdinistas AND COINtras: THE COIN DEBATE

The high cost and dubious outcome of the war in Iraq have spawned a lively discussion among academics and soldiers on the efficacy of COIN. That argument began during the war itself and has continued ever since. Events in Afghanistan have intensified the debate. In 2009, newly-elected President Barack Obama ordered a surge of approximately 30,000 troops to Afghanistan and sent General Petraeus, the alleged mastermind of COIN in Iraq, to oversee the operation. The fall of the northern city of Kunduz to the Taliban in September 2015 suggests that this strategy has failed, a conclusion reinforced by the decision to keep American troops in the country beyond the agreed withdrawal date. After more than a decade of aid and training, the Afghan Army still cannot go it alone. Several analysts argue that the failure of this latest surge owes much to Petraeus's insistence that the strategy used in Iraq could be applied to the vastly different circumstances of Afghanistan.³⁴

The COIN debate has taken several forms. The most strident critics of COIN argue, often vehemently, that COIN simply does not work and should not be attempted. Not only do they use the examples of the recent war in Iraq and the current one in Afghanistan to make their case, but they also rummage through history looking for evidence that COIN has never really succeeded anywhere. Most critics, however, avoid such hyperbole and take a more measured approach to the debate. Some have reassessed the Iraq War to consider what role, if any, COIN played in the successes of 2007-2009. Others argue over whether coercive force or winning hearts and minds played the greatest role in the success of past COIN campaigns. Examination of these debates must precede consideration of what role COIN should play in current and future U.S. Army doctrine, training, and land forces allocation.

COINdinistas.

Historian and national security analyst Douglas Porch created the word “COINdinista” to describe those academics and practitioners who defend the efficacy of COIN and insist upon its importance to the U.S. military. This derogatory term parodies the Marxist “Sandinistas,” who governed Nicaragua in the 1980s. According to Porch, any scholar or soldier who believes COIN to be a valid category of armed conflict and sees value in preparing for it might qualify as a COINdinista, but he and the other extreme critics have a short list of proponents whose views they particularly dislike. John Nagl, author of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malay and Vietnam*, has long been the *bête noir* of

the COIN critics.³⁵ Nagl argued not only that COIN worked, but also that the British Army was better at it than the American Army because it was a “learning institution.” U.S. Army officers understandably bristled at this suggestion, especially when the British performed so poorly in Basra, Iraq.

As the main proponent and most famous practitioner of COIN in Iraq, General Petraeus comes in for extensive criticism as well. In the difficult years of 2004 and 2005, Petraeus had been one of the few commanders who seemed to achieve significant results in his area of operation north of Baghdad. Early in 2006, he published an article in the *Military Review* outlining his approach to COIN and arguing emphatically that it should be employed to the whole of Iraq.³⁶ He listed fourteen principles for successful COIN:

1. Do not try to do too much with your own hands.
2. Act quickly, because every Army of liberation has a half-life.
3. Money is ammunition.
4. Increasing the number of stakeholders is critical to success.
5. Analyze “costs and benefits” before each operation.
6. Intelligence is the key to success.
7. Everyone must do nation building.
8. Help build institutions, not just units.
9. Cultural awareness is a force multiplier.
10. Success in a counterinsurgency requires more than just military operations.
11. Ultimate success depends on local leaders.
12. Remember the strategic corporals and strategic lieutenants.
13. There is no substitute for flexible, adaptable leaders.
14. A leader’s most important task is to set the right tone.³⁷

Petraeus argued not only for overhauling the Iraq War strategy, but also for making COIN a core U.S. military task. "America's overwhelming conventional military superiority makes it unlikely that future enemies will confront us head on," he insisted. "Rather, they will attack us asymmetrically, avoiding our strengths—firepower, maneuver, technology—and come at us and our partners the way the insurgents do in Iraq and Afghanistan."³⁸

A cadre of officers and civilian advisers, who came to be known as the "Petraeus School," made the case for the importance of COIN. Kalev Sepp's article, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," provided recommendations similar to those of Petraeus.³⁹ The anthropologist Montgomery McFate insisted on the importance of cultural awareness in COIN and argued for the need to teach it to soldiers. Noted COIN expert and senior advisor to General Petraeus in Iraq and to General Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan, David Kilcullen, has written numerous books on the subject. These include: *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*; *Counterinsurgency*; and *Out of the Mountains: the Coming of Age of the Urban Guerrilla*.⁴⁰ Kilcullen makes a compelling case that COIN needs to be a core task of the U.S. military for the simple reason that unconventional war will be the most persistent form of armed conflict for the foreseeable future.

The COINtras.

If COIN advocates are to be labeled "COINdinistas," critics of COIN should be dubbed "COINtras," in keeping with the Nicaraguan civil war motif. The COINtras have several characteristics in common. They dismiss COIN doctrine as a myth; they draw

sweeping conclusions about campaigns over broad ranges of time; and they insist that the U.S. military should avoid COIN entirely. They are also terribly preoccupied with debunking the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) as an instructive example, which amounts to flaying a horse that has been dead for a long time. The titles of three prominent works in this school illustrate their hyperbolic nature: Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*; Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*; and, M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency*.⁴¹

Porch has written the most comprehensive of the three critiques of COINdinst thought, though ironically the weakest on documentation. He scours the period from the 18th to the 21st centuries for evidence to prove that COIN has never been a distinctive form of warfare and has never really worked. The apparent victories that threatened states have won, particularly those of the colonial powers in the 20th century, he explains away as failures of the insurgents rather than successes by their opponents. He claims that the “new way of war” had no impact on turning the tide in Iraq and concludes that, at the end of the day, COIN is little more than a bag of tactical tricks. Porch also implies throughout his book that conventional wars are “clean” and unconventional ones are “dirty,” a distinction anyone on the Eastern Front during World War II would surely have found dubious. In a review of *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*, published in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, David Ucko thoroughly eviscerates Porch’s argument.⁴² He takes Porch to task for distorting the definition of COIN to create a straw man — cherry-picking

both historical examples and evidence—and conflating theory, strategy, and tactics. To this scathing critique must be added another criticism: the absence of documentation. The gold standard for historical research has always been the author's ability to muster primary source material—documents from the period under study—to support arguments. Porch, however, bases his sweeping conclusions almost entirely on secondary works.

Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency is better documented and more narrowly focused, but is equally sweeping in its core conclusions. It does, however, contain some very good insights. Written by Colonel Gian Gentile, whom Porch describes as a "kindred spirit,"⁴³ the book examines Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In fewer than 150 pages, using only these four examples, Gentile concludes that "the idea that counterinsurgency works is wrong—and history supports this assertion."⁴⁴ He examines very little history and provides insufficient evidence to support such an emphatic statement. His criticism of Malaya as a model for modern COIN appears directed at Nagl, whom American critics feel has exercised undue influence on U.S. Army doctrine. Most analysts who advocate for the efficacy of COIN doctrine, however, have long since recognized the limitations of the Malayan Emergency as a guide for contemporary practice. Gentile does, however, ground his chapter on Vietnam soundly in the historiographical debate, noting that advocates of COIN have glommed on to the discredited "better war" school, which argues that the earlier and more extensive application of pacification rather than overwhelming conventional force might have won the war.⁴⁵ Finally, Gentile's critique seems driven by an understandable, if exag-

gerated, fear of what COIN will do to the U.S. Army. "As a model for American Warfare in the future," he concludes, "counterinsurgency threatens to transform the army and other parts of the defense establishment into a force organized for nation building, exporting stability to the troubled and obdurate precincts of the globe."⁴⁶

These criticisms of *Wrong Turn* notwithstanding, the book contains an excellent chapter on Iraq, based upon good research and the author's own experience during the war. Gentile rightly challenges the notion that a dramatic transformation in the U.S. military approach to combating the insurgents took place between 2006 and 2009, arguing instead that improvement came from gradual pragmatic adjustments to circumstances. He also notes that the conflict was a complex mix of civil war and insurgency. The decline in violence from 2007 on, he claims, owed more to the segregation of ethnic communities, which diminished violence between them, and an end to the Shia uprising than it did to COIN. In the midst of this insightful discussion, though, Gentile makes an observation about his own experience that overturns the main argument of his book. "From the start," he explains, "my brigade focused on building better governance and security forces, infrastructure and the economy, and combating the Sunni insurgency."⁴⁷ One would be hard pressed to come up with a better definition of COIN. Perhaps what Gentile objects to is not so much COIN per se, but its particular formulation by the U.S. military in Iraq.

The third major tome in the COINtras' trilogy is a highly theoretical work that challenges the efficacy of COIN based upon strategic theory. Written by two political scientists, the British M. L. R. Smith and the

Australian David Martin Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency* argues that because the term “insurgency” covers so many types of conflict, it has little value as a category of military activity. This imprecision, they maintain, in turn renders COIN a vague idea with no operational use. Smith and Jones further insist that no country has ever had a successful COIN tradition. Alleged British prowess in “small wars,” “imperial policing,” and COIN is merely a narrative created by academics and adopted by the British Army as a self-congratulatory myth.⁴⁸ Insurgency has always been hard to define, as has COIN, but that fact does not make such conflicts any less real or the need to counter them any less important. In the real world, functional definitions sometimes work better than theoretical ones. “What does it look like?” may be a more useful question than “What is it?” Smith and Jones further argue that “political will,” not COIN doctrine, strategy, or practice, produced victory in Malaya and other successful campaigns. Since political will in democratic societies equates to popular support, however, maintaining it requires an effective doctrine and strategy for winning – whether the conflict be conventional or unconventional.

Moderate Critics.

Unlike the COINtras, most analysts who raise valid concerns about COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan do not throw the baby out with the bath water. Many writers have questioned the idea that a dramatic transformation in the American approach to waging the war took place in Iraq from 2006-2009. They note that soldiers and Marines began adapting as soon as the insurgency developed in 2004, and that much of

what they learned made its way into the new COIN manual. The transformation was as much bottom-up as top down, although the White House still had to encourage the new approach with its 2005 *Strategy for Victory in Iraq*.⁴⁹ Some of those who emphasize gradual change over sudden transformation challenge the notion that General Petraeus deserves as much credit as his supporters claim, although they do recognize his role as a catalyst in getting FM 3-24 written.⁵⁰ Finally, as one author rightly points out, the adoption of COIN did not mean the end of conventional operations.⁵¹

The COIN approach, developed in Iraq and applied to the war in Afghanistan, has been the subject of considerable discussion. Neither General Petraeus nor his protégé, General Stanley McChrystal, were able to stabilize the country so that U.S. troops could hand the responsibility for security to Afghan government forces and withdraw. One analyst suggests that this lack of success stems from a failure to recognize the different character of the Afghan war—in particular the success of the Taliban in creating parallel hierarchies capable of governing effectively at the local level.⁵² General Karl Eikenberry, who had commanded U.S. forces in Afghanistan from 2005-2007, drew essentially the same conclusion. “Blindly following COIN doctrine led the U.S. military to fixate on defeating the insurgency while giving short shrift to Afghan politics,” he declared in a 2013 *Foreign Affairs* article.⁵³ He argued that Generals McChrystal and Petraeus used methods developed in Iraq as a template for Afghanistan instead of using broad COIN principles to develop a strategy tailored to a different country. “Contingent on context,” Eikenberry warns, “military doctrine is meant to be suggestive, not prescriptive.”⁵⁴

Coercion versus Hearts and Minds.

As the debate over COIN raged among those studying American wars, an equally lively exchange of views was taking place on the subject of British COIN. Because both the proponents and the critics of COIN in the U.S. military have referenced British experience (either praising or debunking it), it is worth examining this debate. Most of those who study Britain's small wars do not challenge the existence of COIN as a unique type of warfare, nor do they deny that the British Army has had a lot of experience with it. They also recognize that COIN involves both military and non-military activities. They disagree over whether coercive force or political, social, and economic reforms produced the greatest results.

A 2012 conference on British COIN expressed this disagreement in its title: "Butcher and Bolt or Hearts and Minds?"⁵⁵ Critics of the British approach argue that coercion rather than conciliation won Britain's COIN campaigns. Authors Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: the Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, and David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: the Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, thoroughly document the extent of atrocities during the Mau Mau insurgency.⁵⁶ Indeed, Elkins served as a Crown witness in a civil case that awarded damages to the victims of the security forces. Karl Hack, Hugh Bennett, and David French have argued that a higher degree of coercion than proponents of the British approach acknowledge characterized other campaigns as well.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, the debate over the use of force in COIN has been framed in an unhelpful way. Coercion and winning hearts and minds were not mutually exclusive options but integrated parts of a synergistic

strategy. During the heyday of its COIN campaigns, the British Army's rules of engagement limited the use of deadly force, not other forms of coercion. The British did compel Chinese squatters to live in secure villages in Malaya, and the Chinese resented being moved, but the government supplied those villages with amenities and offered residents citizenship. Most of the villages remained permanent settlements long after the insurgency ended. The security of the new villages, along with these benefits, encouraged the residents' cooperation, which provided valuable intelligence on the insurgents, allowing the security forces to capture or kill them. Excesses did occur in all British COIN campaigns—indeed in all COIN campaigns—just as they do in conventional war, but that does not mean that force alone produced success.

From Rhetoric to Reality.

The contentious nature of the debate over COIN has stemmed, not only from the tendency of a few writers to stake out extreme positions, but from several other complicating factors. To begin with, soldiers have always disliked unconventional war and probably always will. Unconventional war diminishes the advantages of a conventional military establishment like the U.S. Army with its superior technology and firepower. Like any group of professionals, soldiers wish to avoid duties they do not like to perform. This preference colors the views of some observers, who see in the apparent COIN failures further evidence that what they do not wish to do does not work.

The tendency of critics to conflate doctrine, strategy, and tactics further confuses the issues. Doctrine provides a set of broad principles to guide the craft-

ing of strategy and the shaping of tactics. Doctrine has to be applied flexibly to design a strategy uniquely suited to each conflict. Using one campaign as a blueprint for another is a formula for failure. The Malayan Emergency occurred under particular circumstances not likely to be duplicated elsewhere. Applying its approach to the war in Vietnam did not work, any more than slavishly copying a strategy developed in Iraq succeeded in Afghanistan. Even the best doctrine will not produce results unless a good strategy is devised from it. Effective tactics in turn are necessary to implement strategy, but they are not a substitute for it. Poor tactics can defeat a sound strategy, but even the best tactics will not redeem a poor one.

Just as they have conflated various aspects of COIN, critics have interpreted failure in specific campaigns as evidence that COIN in general does not work. After years of debate, most analysts agree that no American strategy would have produced victory in Vietnam. That conclusion does not, however, mean that pacification failed in the areas where it was applied. Had the government in Saigon engaged in meaningful reform, particularly land reform, to gain legitimacy and win trust, a sound COIN strategy might have worked. Without that legitimacy, no American military doctrine or strategy could have won the war.

The presence of these factors that obfuscate the issues, however, does not reduce the importance of two key points raised by the critics of COIN. First, they correctly point out that conventional and unconventional operations do not exist as neatly distinctive categories in the real world. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have included COIN and conventional operations, often occurring at the same time and in support of one another. The lines between conventional and uncon-

ventional conflict have blurred and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Marine Corps General Charles Krulak recognized this fact when he articulated his concept of a three-block war in the late-1990s. Writing in response to the intervention in Somalia, Krulak insisted that ordinary soldiers and marines might be engaged in humanitarian assistance on one city block, peacekeeping on the next, and war-fighting on the one after that. They had to be trained and equipped to adjust as needed. "The lines separating the levels of war, and distinguishing combatant from 'non-combatant,' will blur," he said in 1999, "and adversaries, confounded by our 'conventional' superiority, will resort to asymmetrical means to redress the imbalance."⁵⁸ Perhaps because it was tied so closely to the big humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, the "three-block war" quickly disappeared as a key concept in U.S. military thought. Its core idea, that few missions will be purely conventional or unconventional, though, remains sound.

Second, the critics remind strategists and policymakers of a painful but inescapable truth: an intervening power cannot win the hearts and minds of another nation's people. If the host government lacks legitimacy and refuses to reform, no COIN strategy devised and implemented by the United States will enable it to defeat insurgents who enjoy popular support. No amount of military force could redeem a corrupt South Vietnamese government that refused to engage in meaningful reform to meet the needs of its large peasant population. While American operations combined with the Anbar Awakening did reduce the Sunni insurgency to a low-level threat, consolidating that gain required the Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to govern in a non-sectarian manner, continue

to pay the Sunni Sheiks a monthly stipend, and keep the pressure on what remained of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Despite persistent U.S. advice, he refused to take these steps. The rise of ISIS and the breakup of Iraq occurred just 3 years after the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces. Ominous signs suggest that the same scenario is unfolding in Afghanistan. If the Taliban govern more effectively (however harshly) at the local level than the Afghan government does, then American COIN has little chance of success. The U.S. military can advise, train, and support host-nation forces, but it cannot take their place.

These and other points raised by critics should remind the U.S. Army and American policymakers that COIN doctrine is not a panacea that will allow the United States to intervene successfully in every internal conflict. On the other hand, the Army cannot wish away unconventional war. Its generals can and must advise policymakers as to which interventions have a reasonable chance of success. Soldiers in a democratic society, however, do not get to pick the wars they wish to fight. At some future date, the Army will be asked to help counter an insurgency, so it must retain some COIN capability. The extent and nature of that capability remain to be considered. That consideration should begin with an examination of current doctrine and force structure, followed by an assessment of contemporary security threats.

U.S. COIN DOCTRINE

While it would be simplistic to argue that one doctrine is as good as another, the basic principles of COIN have remained unchanged over the past half-century. First, defeating an insurgency requires

a comprehensive strategy to address the social, economic, and political causes of unrest. Second, the use of force should be kept limited and focused to target the insurgents without alienating the population amid which they operate. Third, the threatened government must develop a system to coordinate activities of the security forces (military and police) and civil authorities involved in the COIN campaign. Ideally, these three principles make it possible to produce a synergistic strategy: addressing the causes of unrest (a.k.a., winning hearts and minds) and providing security induced cooperation, which provides intelligence on the insurgents leading to the focused use of military force to neutralize them.

Each of these doctrinal principles has been the subject of extensive elaboration, and several strategic and tactical precepts can be derived from them. Numerous studies discuss the importance of intelligence. Military manuals emphasize the limited effectiveness of firepower and the importance of small-unit tactics. Almost everyone who has written on the subject emphasizes junior leadership, pointing out that COIN is a corporal and a lieutenant's war. Any work on the subject worth its salt stresses the need for flexibility, emphasizes the uniqueness of each conflict, and insists on the necessity of developing a strategy tailored to specific circumstances.

The FM 3-24 (2006).

Few FMs have attracted as much interest or sparked as much controversy as FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. The manual, which took a year to draft, provides an overview of the nature of insurgency and a comprehensive discussion of how to counter it.⁵⁹ Con-

trary to the critics' claims, FM 3-24 is not merely a bag of tactical tricks, though it does contain a wealth of information useful to junior officers and NCOs. The manual emphasizes formulating an effective strategy and constantly revising it as circumstances change. It also demonstrates a keen appreciation of the gap between the ideal and the real. In discussing "Unity of Effort," for example, FM 3-24 distinguishes the differences between a "Preferred Division of Labor," in which civil and military participants from both the supporting and host nation perform their appropriate tasks, and "Realistic Division of Labor," which recognizes that the military may be the only fully functioning entity in a war-torn country. "By default, U.S. and multinational military forces often possess the only readily available capability to meet many of the local populace's fundamental needs," it concludes.

Despite its many merits, though, FM 3-24 has one significant weakness. Its discussion of insurgency focuses too narrowly on the communist model in which insurgency unfolds methodically through distinct phases. The manual overlooks chronic insurgency and the role of shadow governance. These deficiencies may help explain why U.S. forces have had such difficulty conducting COIN in Afghanistan. Pashtuns in the countryside care more about effective governance in their towns and villages than they do about the central government in Kabul, as long as it does not interfere with their lives. The cities have never been the center of gravity in Afghanistan.

The FM 3-24 (2014).

Good doctrine, COIN or otherwise, is never static. The military must constantly update it to incorporate lessons learned in the field and new research on the subject. With this realization in mind, the Pentagon produced a new edition of FM 3-24 in 2014. It not only revised, but also completely overhauled, the 2006 manual, preserving the best of the previous edition while augmenting it with new material. The authors changed the structure, beginning with an analysis of the environment in which intrastate conflicts arise, moving to a nuanced discussion of the nature of insurgency, and concluding with how to counter it. This highly effective organization intentionally seeks “to provide the context of a problem, the problem, and possible solutions.”⁶⁰ The manual’s new title, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, reflects its comprehensive understanding of intrastate conflict and its flexible, pragmatic approach to addressing the threat.

The new version of FM 3-24 also discusses a more diverse range of insurgencies and recognizes the insurgent-criminal nexus that often exists in such conflicts. Rather than define insurgencies in terms of fixed characteristics, the manual examines them using “common dynamics: leadership, objective, ideology and narratives, environment and geography, external support and sanctuaries, phasing and timing.”⁶¹ This innovative conceptual framework avoids the unhelpful tendency to assign insurgencies to fixed categories. The new edition of FM 3-24 is comprehensive and nuanced in its treatment of COIN. It stresses the need for flexible planning, recognizing that sound principles can produce different approaches to solving a problem depending on the circumstances. It emphasizes

unity of effort, the primacy of intelligence, limits on the use of force, and building host-nation capacity. It also includes a very helpful section on the “paradoxes of counterinsurgency,” which contains the wisdom that “sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction.”⁶² Finally, the manual provides a lengthy discussion of assessment, stressing the importance of developing ways to determine whether a COIN strategy is succeeding.

The 2006 edition of FM 3-24 is good; however, the 2014 version is even better. Together they have corrected the post-Vietnam error of relegating COIN to broad, amorphous, and largely unhelpful categories such as “low-intensity conflict” or “operations other than war,” where it could be largely ignored. Doctrine, however, gets the military only so far. It must be matched by capability. Capability consists of designated forces and the training they receive, as well as learning institutions. Examination of current capability must therefore precede discussion of the future role COIN should play in national military strategy and land forces allocations.

CURRENT CAPABILITY

The United States military consists of active duty, Reserve, and National Guard components. The total-force concept developed after the end of the draft intended for Guard and Reserve units to operate in support of regular combat forces. Since insurgencies render meaningless the distinction between front and rear areas, however, many Guard and Reserve units found themselves at the sharp end of hostilities in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, many soldiers and marines from all three total-force components

have significant experience in COIN. That reservoir of talent will decline as men and women retire and as the armed services concentrate on other threats. Only one component of the military focuses specifically on unconventional conflict: the U.S. SOCOM, created in 1987. The U.S. military has also created learning institutions dedicated to studying COIN.

Force Structure.

While the Navy and Air Force contribute units to SOCOM and provide invaluable support for missions, the Army and Marine Corps shoulder most of the responsibility for COIN, which consists primarily of ground operations. The current strength of the active-duty Army is approximately 490,000; the Guard and Reserve, 552,200. The Marine Corps consists of 184,100 active duty personnel and 39,000 reservists.⁶³ Army strength is to be reduced to 450,000 by 2017, but that could change, depending on the policy of the new administration or a change in the international security situation. Total strength is not, of course, combat strength. As of 2011, only 17% of active duty military personnel performed “combat specialties.”⁶⁴ Given that the tooth-to-tail ratio for the Navy and Air Force are significantly lower than for the ground forces, and the ambiguity over what constitutes a “combat specialty,” the Army and Marine Corps probably have a better ratio of combat arms to support personnel. Even they, however, would be doing well if 20% of a deployed force engaged in direct combat activities.

Deciding whether or not current troop strength is adequate to meet current needs depends on whom you ask and how he/she assesses the threat environment. Anyone arguing for the virtues of expedi-

tionary COIN should remember that the simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan stretched the Army very thin, necessitated extensive use of Guard and Reserve forces, and created a very unhealthy operational tempo that placed an incredible burden on military personnel and their families. At the height of those conflicts, troop strength was considerably higher than it is now, and that was before Russia moved against the Ukraine and China became more assertive in East Asia. Whether the United States could afford such a labor-intensive mission in today's threat environment is a moot point.

Special Operations Command (SOCOM).

The missions in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated that every soldier and marine may be called upon under certain circumstances to conduct COIN operations and that they are more than capable of doing so. One element of the American defense establishment, however, has COIN as a core task. Created by the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act as the only non-geographic combatant command, SOCOM is divided into four service commands, seven regional commands, and one joint command. It consists of approximately 66,000 active duty and reserve service personnel, including: 27,000 Army, 3,000 Marines, 10,000 Navy, and 19,500 Air Force.⁶⁵

Direct Action, such as the dramatic raid on Osama bin Laden's hideout, makes up a small percentage of SOCOM operations, but it looms large in public perceptions of what its forces do. Training and advising foreign militaries comprises the bulk of SOF activities. SOCOM's regional sub-commands deploy small liaison teams to numerous countries. The vast majority

of these deployments involve no combat. In some cases, though, advising quickly turns into direct action. On October 22, 2015, a SOF team advising a Kurdish Peshmerga unit during a raid to liberate ISIS captives joined in the fight when the Kurds got into trouble. One American died in the engagement. In a COIN campaign, direct action and advising would occur simultaneously and on a regular basis.

Another vital element of SOCOM essential in a COIN campaign is its CA Battalions. CA units conduct activities to support the civilian population. This support includes humanitarian relief, infrastructure projects, and capacity building, which are tasks vital to the success of COIN. Because CA requires skills more commonly found in the civilian world than in the armed services, most of the U.S. Army's CA capacity, some 100,000 personnel, resides in the reserve. Because CA may be required at short notice, however, the U.S. Army SOCOM maintains an active duty CA brigade (five battalions) at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.⁶⁶ The size of this component includes three more active duty CA battalions than existed before the start of the Iraq War.

The United States has expanded SOCOM to deal with the increase in unconventional threats. Its 66,000 troops perform a wide variety of activities. SOCOM alone could thus not sustain a large-scale COIN campaign without compromising its ability to perform the other tasks in its broad mission. SOF units could support a host nation or even several host nations facing internal threats. SOCOM cannot by itself, however, conduct a protracted expeditionary COIN campaign. Those who advocate relegating COIN to SOCOM, where it resided prior to the invasion of Iraq, would do well to keep this limitation in mind.

Learning Institutions.

The COIN capacity of the U.S. military includes not only personnel capable of carrying out operations, but also the institutions it has developed to capture and transmit lessons learned. The armed services have a broad range of schools and centers, including: command and staff colleges, war colleges, and a National War College to educate officers as they advance through their careers. COIN is part of the curriculum, to varying degrees, at all of them. In addition to these generic schools, two learning institutions in particular deal specifically with unconventional conflicts: the U.S. Army Special Operations Center of Excellence, and the U.S. Marine Corps Small Wars Center and Integration Division.

Along with the U.S. Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, the Special Operations Center at Fort Bragg has taken over the role of the Irregular Warfare Center, which closed in October 2014.⁶⁷ The Special Operations Center “trains, educates, develops and manages world-class Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations and Special Forces warriors and leaders in order to provide our nation with highly educated, innovative and adaptive operators.”⁶⁸ The Center preserves and transmits lessons of past and contemporary conflicts as it trains the next generation of SOF. Its location within SOCOM, however, may limit its impact on the Regular Army.

The Small Wars Center and Irregular Warfare Integration Division at Quantico, Virginia, performs the same function for the U.S. Marine Corps as the Special Operations Center does for the Army. It also publishes the *Small Wars Journal*, a useful forum for presenting research on COIN and other unconventional war

subjects. Together, these institutions serve as a valuable repository of the collective experience gained in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as venues for continuing to discuss COIN. As the memory of the two conflicts fades, the importance of these and other learning institutions will increase.

CONTEMPORARY SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The U.S. military in general and the U.S. Army in particular clearly have a significant COIN capability. Whether that capability is adequate for the contemporary security environment depends upon an assessment of current and future threats. Three key strategic documents contain the most current threat assessment conducted by the U.S. Government: the *Quadrennial Defense Review: 2014*; the 2015, Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) annual *Worldwide Threat Assessment*; and the Pentagon's *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America: 2015*. All three were written before a series of ISIS terrorist attacks were launched against Turkey, Russia, Lebanon, France, and the United States in late-Fall 2015, so, like any such documents, they need constant updating. Nonetheless, the reports provide an accurate assessment of the contemporary security environment.

Quadrennial Defense Review.

Conducted every 5 years, the most recent review, *Quadrennial Defense Review: 2014*, begins with a chapter on "The Future Security Environment." The chapter examines current regional and global trends in order to identify future threats; Russia and China figure most prominently in this assessment. "In particular,

the rapid pace and comprehensive scope of China's military modernization continues," the *Review* warns, "combined with a relative lack of transparency and openness from China's leaders regarding both military capabilities and intentions."⁶⁹ China's assertion of exclusive rights in the South China Sea and its bellicose behavior toward Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam warrant concern. The *Review* also notes that: "Russia's multi-dimensional defense modernization and actions that violate the sovereignty of its neighbors present risks."⁷⁰ The violation of sovereignty mentioned in this statement refers to Moscow's annexation of Crimea and Russian support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. To those concerns could be added the Kremlin's effort to assert control over the oil-rich Arctic Ocean.

In addition to discussing the threat posed by traditional rivals Russia and China, the *Review* identifies threats posed by smaller nations. North Korea has an active nuclear program and behaves in a bellicose manner toward its neighbors. It has ballistic missiles capable of hitting South Korea and Japan. "Continued instability in the Balkans and on the periphery of Europe," the report explains, threatens U.S. allies in that region.⁷¹ The refugee crisis, which has intensified since the *Review* came out in March, has added to that instability in Southeastern Europe as most of the people fleeing violence in Syria pass through Balkan states on their way to Western Europe.

Besides these conventional threats, the *Review* identifies a host of unconventional ones, all of which have serious implications for defense planning and resource allocation. Transnational organized crime has security implications, especially when it intersects with other threats. Terrorism remains a serious inter-

national problem, though not an existential threat. The United States has suffered cyber-attacks perpetrated by states as well as by rogue individuals. The *Review* recognizes that the U.S. military may also need to support allied nations threatened by insurgency.

DIA Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment.

Each year the DIA reports to Congress on the threats facing the United States. By the time the DIA Director addressed the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 26, 2015, the international situation had changed significantly from what it had been at the time of the *Quadrennial Review* published almost a year before. ISIS exploded onto the international stage with the capture of Mosul in mid-June 2014. It soon gained control of a swathe of territory stretching through Iraq and Syria. ISIS created a shadow government, instituted a brutal version of Sharia law, and developed an international terrorist network. The Director described these developments as “worrying,” as was the collapse of the Iraqi military in the face of ISIS attacks.⁷²

The Director also expressed concern about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Despite 13 years of aid, training, and direct assistance, the Afghan Security Forces were still not able to secure their country without significant U.S. help, including boots on the ground. Events soon justified this concern. In September 2015, the Taliban captured the town of Kunduz north of the capital, Kabul, and in October, President Obama announced that the United States would not withdraw its remaining combat troops as planned. It would maintain a force of 9,800 in the country through 2016 and reduce it to 5,500 the following year. Even

this extended timetable for withdrawal may prove to be optimistic.

The Director shared the concern for a resurgent Russia and a more assertive China expressed by the *Quadrennial Review*. He also voiced the same fear of North Korea, adding that the poor quality of the dictatorship's conventional forces increased the likelihood that it would continue developing its nuclear arsenal along with ballistic missile delivery systems. Testifying before the United States reached a nuclear arms limitation agreement with Iran, the director named the Islamic Republic as a regional threat in the Middle East. He also mentioned internal threats to America's precarious ally Pakistan as a security concern.

In addition to discussing conventional threats, the DIA Director considered the same unconventional ones noted by the *Quadrennial Review*. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates (al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, etc.) remained a priority, but ISIS topped his list of concerns even before the wave of attacks it conducted in late-Fall 2015. The possibility that such groups might use a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) is worrisome. The Director also expressed concern over cyberthreats mounted by hostile states, terrorist organizations, and/or rogue individuals.

National Military Strategy.

The National Military Strategy of the United States of America: 2015 is derived from the *National Security Strategy*, but it focuses on military threats. Instead of grouping these threats into distinct categories, it arranges them along a continuum with "state conflict" at one end and "nonstate conflict" at the other. Between these two, there is a third area of "hybrid conflict."⁷³

The strategy graphs these three types of conflict based on the probability and consequences of each. Conventional conflict between states has a low probability, but serious consequences should it ever occur. The report notes, however, that the probability of state conflict is increasing. Nonstate conflict is far more probable, but its consequences are less serious.

The National Military Strategy of the United States of America: 2015 identifies the same threats as the other assessments. In the conventional arena, it sees a resurgent Russia and an assertive China along with the rogue state North Korea as causes for concern. The document uses the term “Violent Extremist Organization” instead of “terrorism” to describe that major unconventional threat, a clear recognition that the organizations, not their tactics, can be targeted. The *Strategy* makes no specific mention of COIN, but speaks often of supporting American allies. Presumably, COIN would fall in the category of hybrid war.

CURRENT STRATEGY AND THE ROLE OF COIN

From Threat Assessment to Defense Strategy.

Identifying threats and even prioritizing them is much easier than devising a strategy for countering them. The case of China illustrates this problem. The United States wants to support its regional allies: the Philippines, Taiwan, and Japan. It does not recognize China’s claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea and views with alarm Chinese assertiveness there and in the East China Sea off Japan. The Pentagon is also alarmed by China’s development of weapons systems designed to outmatch American forces in the region: particularly a long-range, anti-ship missile that threat-

ens to reduce the effectiveness of aircraft carriers. The White House has promised a “rebalancing to Asia,” vowing to move assets to the region to counter the Chinese threat.

What, however, does “countering” actually mean? The United States can deploy more naval vessels and aircraft to East Asia, but they will have no deterrent effect unless Beijing believes U.S. forces will engage Chinese ones. Washington will almost certainly avoid such a confrontation in the interest of world peace, which means China will have considerable freedom to operate in its near abroad, just as the United States has always done in the Caribbean. This strategic reality calls into question the wisdom of spending billions on military assets that cannot realistically be used. Economic leverage and diplomatic maneuvering, including an alliance with former enemy Vietnam, will probably achieve more than carrier battle groups or strike aircraft can.

The same may be said about Russian activity in Ukraine. Economic sanctions are hurting Russia, although it is not clear whether they will change the Kremlin’s behavior. Even if Moscow were to annex the eastern Ukraine, as it did Crimea, Washington would avoid any direct military confrontation with Russian forces. Arguably, this region has already become a de facto part of Russia. The real concern is where Moscow might move next. Disgruntled Russian minorities in the Baltic States could be a source of further Russian meddling. Since these nations belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States is obligated to defend them. The June 2015 decision to deploy tanks, artillery, and other equipment to the Baltics sent a clear message that the United States will back its allies. Vladimir Putin is, however, very

unlikely to provoke a direct confrontation with NATO forces. Nor will he engage allied naval and air forces directly in the oil-rich Arctic Sea, much of which he claims as a Russian preserve. A massive buildup of conventional forces in Europe would be expensive and have too little effect, since neither side wishes a direct confrontation.

The unconventional threats enumerated by the U.S. Department of Defense and the DIA, like their conventional counterparts, are easier to list than to counter. Few of them can be addressed by purely military means. The most serious threat—cyberattacks—may best be handled by intelligence agencies rather than the Pentagon. Countering terrorism does involve military activity, but it also requires efforts by law enforcement and the intelligence community. Support for foreign states threatened by insurgency requires a coordinated effort by the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and a host of other government and non-governmental agencies, as well as the Department of Defense.

Matching Capabilities is not Strategy.

The United States thus faces threats it can easily identify but not easily counter. In such a situation, the Pentagon may fall back on the Cold War stratagem of matching or exceeding its adversaries' capabilities. This approach might have worked in the era of super-power confrontation when Washington rightly feared that to allow the enemy to develop a technological or numerical edge was to invite aggression. In the more complex, multi-polar world of today, it probably would not. Deterrence still matters, but trying to match China and Russia ship for ship, tank for

tank, and plane for plane would be very expensive and largely ineffective. Even with superior numbers and equipment, the United States would not confront militarily either nation operating in its near abroad, provided it did not directly attack an American ally, which Beijing and Moscow have the good sense not to do. The United States will certainly defend its allies in the Far East, but it will not start World War III over a pile of rocks in the Sea of Japan.

Trying to match adversaries in every weapon system in every contested area will not secure the American homeland nor protect U.S. allies and interests abroad, but it will add to the national debt and thus weaken the country. Acquisition of equipment must be based on a strategy designed to employ it effectively; meanwhile, conventional capabilities cannot be neglected. The prospect of even a mid-level conventional war seems remote. Unconventional threats abound, and those threats can be countered through direct and indirect action. COIN capabilities provide a valuable asset in this security effort. Those capabilities, however, must be based upon a comprehensive, flexible strategy.

COIN AND THE U.S. MILITARY

Current U.S. Strategy.

Contrary to what its title proclaims, the annual *National Security Strategy* presents a list of broad strategic goals rather than a detailed strategic plan for achieving them. The *Quadrennial Review* does a better job of articulating such a strategy based upon its threat assessment and projected force capabilities. That strategy rests upon the three Department of Defense pillars:

- *Protect the homeland*, to deter and defeat attacks on the United States and to support civil authorities in mitigating the effects of potential attacks and natural disasters.
- *Build security globally*, in order to preserve regional stability, deter adversaries, support allies and partners, and cooperate with others to address common security challenges.
- *Project power and win decisively*, to defeat aggression, disrupt and destroy terrorist networks, and provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief [*italics in original*].⁷⁴

The *National Military Strategy of the United States: 2015* builds upon the *National Security Strategy* and the *Quadrennial Review*, identifying specific national security interests:

- The survival of the Nation.
- The prevention of catastrophic attack against U.S. territory.
- The security of the global economic system.
- The security, confidence, and reliability of our allies.
- The protection of American citizens abroad.
- The preservation and extension of universal values.⁷⁵

From these interests the National Military Strategy derives national military objectives:

- Deter, deny, and defeat state adversaries.
- Disrupt, degrade, and defeat violent extremist organizations.
- Strengthen our global network of allies and partners.⁷⁶

Other than expressing a desire to operate across the conflict spectrum, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America: 2015* does not explain precisely how it will fulfill those three objectives.

Prioritizing Threats.

The United States currently faces no serious conventional threat to its homeland. Terrorism, domestic and international, remains a persistent but not an existential threat. Domestic terrorism has taken more lives over the past decade, but the responsibility for handling it belongs to law enforcement. Since 9/11, only two international terrorism plots have taken place on American soil: the April 15, 2013, Boston Marathon bombing, which killed 4 people (including a police officer shot by the escaping perpetrators); and the December 2, 2015, San Bernardino, California mass shooting, which killed 14 people. Since lone-wolf terrorists residing in the United States and acting out of sympathy for Islamist extremists perpetrated both attacks, however, the plots were not entirely international. The November 2015 Paris attacks, however, serve as a grim reminder that organizations like ISIS still have the potential to cause mass casualties and inflict severe economic damage. Acting against terrorist organizations before they strike or in retaliation for attacks falls to the military, which may also help mitigate the consequences of an incident at home. Cyberthreats have the enormous potential to cause harm; however, just how big a role the military should play in countering them is unclear.

COIN and U.S. Strategy.

This monograph focuses on U.S. military preparedness to meet unconventional threats. Critics of COIN should breathe easier reading the *Quadrennial Review*, the *National Strategy*, and *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America: 2015*. If there ever was a risk that the Army and Marines would focus disproportionately on COIN, that danger has clearly past. The *Quadrennial Review* makes clear that “our forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale prolonged stability operations.”⁷⁷ This conclusion reflects the views of a Congress and public weary of large-scale, long-term nation-building operations. “The Department of Defense will rebalance our counterterrorism [CT] efforts toward greater emphasis on building partnership capacity,” the *Review* explains, “especially in fragile states, while retaining robust capability for direct action, including intelligence, persistent surveillance, precision strike, and Special Operations Forces.”⁷⁸ This assertion reveals a reversion to the indirect approach of the El Salvadoran civil war, but also the tendency to conflate “CT” with “COIN.”

The “rebalancing” of the strategic approach to COIN and CT requires a corresponding rebalancing of forces. Following the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq and their anticipated (albeit delayed) withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Pentagon planned for reductions in U.S. forces. Recent activity by ISIS and/or the 2016 presidential election may result in a reversal of plans to reduce the active duty military and reserve components. If the impending cuts are not made, it is quite likely that at least some of the additional troops will be allocated to SOCOM. In the meantime, the Pentagon must base its planning on projected personnel numbers.

The *Quadrennial Review* outlines the shape of the new leaner military. The Air Force will have to make due with fewer fighters and a reduced transport capability, but it will continue to develop and acquire stealth aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones. These precision weapons, especially the drones, play a major role in CT and COIN because of their ability to penetrate hostile territory with no risk to U.S. personnel and to strike enemy targets with great precision. The Navy will increase its number of ships through 2020. The Pentagon aims to maintain 10 aircraft carrier strike groups, although what threats such a large, expensive collection of ships is designed to counter remains unclear. China and Russia have one carrier each. The other nations with carriers have at most two and are either neutral nations or American allies.

The two services that would engage most heavily in conventional and unconventional wars, the Army and Marine Corps, face significant manpower cuts. The active duty Army will be reduced to 440,000-450,000 from its peak strength of 570,000 at the height of the Iraq War; the National Guard will be reduced from 358,000 to 335,000, and the Reserve from 205,000 to 195,000.⁷⁹ The active duty Marine Corps will be reduced from 184,100 to 182,000, which includes 900 additional embassy guards.⁸⁰ The United States is thus building ships it may never use and cutting troops it will probably not deploy. One set of ground forces, though, has been increased significantly, and is slated to receive even more resources. SOCOM strength will increase from its current level of 66,000 to 69,700.⁸¹

The U.S. military thus has a broad range of assets in a highly flexible joint establishment capable of engaging in a number of missions. It also has an excel-

lent doctrine for a wide array of operations, including COIN and CT. How precisely the Pentagon would use this doctrine to develop a strategy to deploy these assets to achieve the goals identified in the *National Security Strategy*, particularly projecting power globally, is not entirely clear. Addressing that question requires considering what role, if any, COIN should play in training and equipping U.S. forces.

Options.

As the U.S. military in general and the Army in particular considers the role COIN should play in its contingency planning, it has four options. Each option has implications for force allocation and training as well as advantages and disadvantages. Choosing among them must be based on current threat assessments and consideration of the degree to which threats can be countered by military means.

Option 1: Revert to Conventional Approach. The U.S. military might, as some critics of COIN argue that it should, revert to the approach of the 1990s. During that period, the Pentagon focused on being able to fight two short-term, mid-level conventional wars. It relegated COIN and other unconventional activities to the newly created SOCOM. The Salvadoran civil war seemed to provide the best model for aiding friendly governments threatened by insurgency. A small number of SOF advisors assisting the host-nation military equipped by the United States appeared to offer a low-cost approach to COIN.

This approach had much to commend it; however, it had some serious problems as well. It allowed the U.S. military to concentrate on what it considered its

primary task, preparing to fight and win the nation's wars. Operation DESERT STORM during the 1991 Gulf War provided exactly the kind of conflict the Pentagon wished to fight, a short and decisive conventional action using overwhelming force and exploiting its vast superiority in technology and firepower. The Gulf War seemed to vindicate U.S. military strategy. As the 1990s wore on, however, it became clear that there would be no more DESERT STORM type of operations. The U.S. military would instead be called upon to participate in internal security operations in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo — missions dubbed “nation building” — which looked far too much like COIN for the Pentagon's comfort. Then 9/11 happened, and the U.S. military soon found itself in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its prowess at conventional war allowed it to overrun both countries rapidly, but lack of preparation for the COIN campaigns that followed led to disaster.

The problem with the no-COIN approach is that reality cannot be changed by wishful thinking. The U.S. military does not get to pick its wars. Unconventional threats far exceed conventional ones in number and frequency. Like it or not, America's Armed Forces may at a moment's notice be tasked with conducting a COIN campaign. That happened in Iraq in 2004. Neither the Army nor the Marines could avoid the mission by insisting that they did not like it or were not prepared to carry it out. The small number of SOF with any COIN training or experience available at the time could not stabilize such a large country. Regular units, including Guard and Reserve contingents, had to learn COIN on the fly. They rose to the challenge, but the period of adjustment proved costly in lives and treasure.

Option 2: Focus on Unconventional Threats. Given the preponderance of unconventional threats in the contemporary security environment and the cost and limited use of many conventional weapons systems, focusing on unconventional threats might seem like an attractive option. The U.S. military could never completely abandon its conventional capability, but it might choose to devote more of its personnel and resources to countering asymmetric threats as General Petraeus recommended. Such an approach would mean fewer tanks and more Stryker vehicles, fewer bombers and more drones. Regular units as well as SOF would spend more time training for COIN, CT, and other unconventional operations.

This approach has some serious problems that argue against its adoption. Though fewer in number than unconventional threats, conventional ones are more serious. Terrorism has the potential to hurt the United States, but it does not threaten the survival of the country. Foreign interventions, including expeditionary COIN campaigns, are wars of choice, not wars of necessity. Allowing conventional capabilities in Europe to deteriorate too far might invite Russian aggression on the fringes of NATO. Weakening conventional forces in Asia would send the wrong message to regional allies and embolden China.

In addition to these concerns, placing too much emphasis on unconventional operations overlooks an important point. Analysts often make a clear distinction between conventional and unconventional war that does not exist in the real world. Iraq and Afghanistan, like Vietnam before them, were hybrid wars. In both conflicts, the United States conducted conventional operations and COIN at the same time and often in support of one another. The battle against ISIS is

proving to be another hybrid affair. The United States and its allies have conducted extensive conventional air strikes. These strikes have been most effective when carried out in support of local forces assisted by SOF advisers. Focusing predominantly on either a conventional or unconventional capability ignores the relationship between them, and would therefore be a bad idea.

Option 3: Develop Two-Speed Soldiers. Most militaries around the world do not have the luxury of creating specialists to deal with each category of threat. Their soldiers must be able to perform security missions across the spectrum of operations. They train two-speed soldiers capable of conventional and unconventional operations. European states during the era of decolonization conducted their COIN campaigns with regular soldiers, many of them conscripts. Their ability to practice COIN does not seem to have compromised their preparedness for conventional operations. The same British Army that won in Malaya fought well in Korea.

While training two-speed soldiers has a cost-saving benefit, it would not work as well today as it did when warfare relied less on technology. Sophisticated weapons systems require a high degree of education and training to operate. Time spent training for and conducting unconventional operations such as COIN probably does not adversely affect (and may even enhance) the readiness of soldiers performing support roles. Logistics is, after all, logistics. For some combat arms, however, training for and conducting sustained unconventional operations might erode conventional war-fighting skills. During the height of the Iraq War, three Brigade Combat Team commanders wrote a

white paper complaining that, with most artillerymen operating outside their traditional roles, 90 percent of artillery units were not prepared to provide fire support in a high-intensity conflict.⁸² The U.S. military thus cannot rely upon two-speed soldiers—generalists capable of performing a range of tasks adequately, but none of them well.

Option 4: Retain COIN as a Core SOF Function. Between forgoing COIN preparation entirely and reconfiguring the entire Armed Forces for asymmetric warfare lies a realistic middle ground. With an expanded SOCOM projected to number almost 70,000 personnel, assigning primary responsibility for COIN to SOF makes more sense than it did when the SOF community was a small, marginalized part of the Armed Forces. “Primary responsibility” does not, however, mean “exclusive responsibility.” While no one, civilian or military, is eager to engage in another Iraq-style intervention, the U.S. Armed Forces may at some future date be asked to deploy an expeditionary COIN mission whether or not they wish to do so. As long as that possibility exists, training for regular forces must include a modicum of COIN instruction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Of the options to consider, number four offers the best alternative for the U.S. military to counter the range of threats it faces in the contemporary security environment. The Armed Forces in general and the U.S. Army in particular cannot afford to ignore COIN completely or to become preoccupied with it. Accepting that broad option requires the consideration of specific recommendations for implementing it.

Prepare for Conflict across the Threat Spectrum but Prioritize Threats.

Conventional war between nations and alliances may be improbable, but the consequences of such a conflict, should it occur, would be grave. Critics of COIN are, therefore, right to insist that nothing be done to weaken the military's ability to fight and win a conventional war. As long as potentially hostile states maintain large conventional establishments, the United States must focus on countering the threats they pose. Losing a COIN campaign would be a setback; losing a conventional war would be a disaster.

Keep Primary Responsibility for COIN in SOCOM.

The Pentagon increased its SOF during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It has wisely decided to not only spare SOCOM from personnel reductions, but also to increase its strength even further. SOCOM already includes COIN in its list of core tasks and should continue to do so.

Develop COIN Surge Capacity.

Primary responsibility does not mean sole responsibility. During the post-Vietnam era, the regular forces relegated COIN to SOF, a decision they believed relieved them of any responsibility for preparing for COIN. That decision had disastrous consequences in Iraq, where an insurgency developed rapidly after the American invasion. The intrastate conflict was too large for SOF to handle alone, especially in the face of Pentagon reluctance to admit that an insurgency

was developing. Soldiers trained almost exclusively for conventional operations thus found themselves patrolling neighborhoods in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, learning COIN the hard way by trial and error. They adapted, but the delay was costly in lives and treasure.

The experience of Iraq suggests that it would be a mistake, therefore, to assume that regular forces will never be asked to engage in COIN. On the other hand, demands for training time have been increasing. Given that constraint, it does not make sense to spend inordinate amounts of time training regular troops for this one contingency. The Army should, however, develop the capacity to train conventional soldiers for COIN in the event of a major expedition. Since SOF liaison teams already spend much of their time training and advising foreign armies, it would be easy for them to perform the same function for their regular comrades in arms, thus giving the Army the ability to “surge” COIN forces as needed.

Preserve Learning Institutions.

The learning institutions created by the military played a crucial role in preparing soldiers and marines to conduct COIN operations. These included facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States. The Army even set up a mock Iraqi town at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. The Leader Development for Education and Sustained Peace program dispatched mobile teams to help prepare Guard and Reserve units deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan. Not all of these programs and institutions can or should be sustained on a regular basis, but the U.S. Army Special Operations Warfare Center of Excellence and the

U.S. Marine Corps Small Wars Center and Integration Division continue as vibrant learning institutions, preserving the lessons of recent conflicts and studying the challenges of unconventional warfare.

Embrace a more Expansive Concept of COIN.

The debate over COIN has been hampered by the fallacious assumption that conventional and unconventional operations exist as distinct categories of military activity in the real world. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and recent operations against ISIS, demonstrate the fallacy of this distinction. Modern COIN is a hybrid affair in which conventional and unconventional operations occur side by side. Fortunately, the latest rendition of *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America: 2015* recognizes that COIN, as well as many other military operations, belongs to the gray area of hybrid conflicts.

Avoid Expeditionary COIN.

The critics of COIN do make one very important point: expeditionary COIN has not been successful and should be avoided. The Vietnam War made abundantly clear that propping up a regime that lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its own people does not work. Afghanistan and Iraq underscored that lesson. The success of the Taliban stems in large measure from its ability to govern more effectively at the local level than the corrupt government in Kabul. Former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's decision to govern Iraq in the interests of its Shia majority led to the rise of ISIS. In the face of such bad governance, the U.S. efforts to train Iraqi and Afghan forces have enjoyed limited success.

Provide Assistance with Small Advisory Missions.

While large-scale expeditionary COIN has achieved limited results, small advisory missions in support of relatively stable governments have been more successful. As the situation in Iraq deteriorated, another campaign was succeeding. Eclipsed by the two much larger deployments, a U.S. advisory mission to the Philippines contributed significantly to eliminating a major terrorist threat. From 2001 to 2011, U.S. SOF helped the Philippines' military conduct an effective COIN campaign against the al-Qaeda affiliate Abu Sayyaf. The U.S. mission peaked at 1,200 personnel in 2001 and declined to 400 in 2011. Maintaining its average contingent of 600 cost approximately \$50 million a year at a time when the United States was spending \$2 billion a week in Afghanistan.⁸³

Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF)-Philippines was a low-cost, small-footprint mission operating with a limited mandate under restrictive rules of engagement. It established broad, achievable strategic goals:

- *Building Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) capacity.* U.S. ground, maritime, and air components trained, advised, and assisted Philippine security forces to help create a secure and stable environment.
- *Focused civil-military operations.* Philippine-led, U.S.-facilitated humanitarian and civic-action projects demonstrated the government's concern for regional citizens and improved their quality of life.
- *Information operations (IO).* Aiming to enhance government legitimacy in the region, the joint U.S.-Philippine effort used IO to emphasize the success of the first two lines of operation [*italics in original*].⁸⁴

The JSOTF worked alongside AFP, but did not do the fighting for them. In addition to this SOF effort, other U.S. units improved roads and bridges and dug wells. The Americans also provided intelligence that helped the Philippine forces fix and destroy Abu Sayyaf contingents.⁸⁵

American assistance would not have been successful had the AFP themselves not been willing to change their approach to COIN. During the 1970s, civilians feared the army as a tool of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. "There was not much emphasis on human rights," one Filipino general admitted.⁸⁶ With American support, the Filipinos changed their approach, providing security to local people, engaging in humanitarian projects, and winning trust, which in turn produced good intelligence on the insurgents.⁸⁷ The strategy worked; Abu Sayyaf has been reduced to a small terrorist/criminal organization engaging in piracy but able to accomplish little else.

Critics, no doubt, will point out that doing COIN on an island is much easier than conducting it in a vast country like Afghanistan or Iraq. Nonetheless, the approach of JSOTF-Philippines has much to commend it as a model for COIN. Like the operation in El Salvador, it underscores the lesson that under the right circumstances a great deal can be accomplished by a small advisory mission. The success of such a mission, however, depends entirely on the willingness of the host-nation government and its military to heed the given advice and engage in needed reforms. Without such a commitment, a U.S. mission can accomplish little. The United States simply cannot win someone else's war for them. The larger the force deployed to a host-nation the more likely it will be resented by the local people as a foreign occupation, especially if it props up a regime that lacks legitimacy.

While the outcome of the struggle with ISIS remains unclear, considerable evidence suggests that the small-footprint approach is having a positive effect on that struggle as well. U.S. advisory teams have been working closely with Kurdish Peshmerga forces operating in northern Iraq. On October 23, 2015, Kurds backed by a U.S. SOF team conducted a successful hostage rescue mission. Unfortunately, one U.S. soldier died in the assault, demonstrating how quickly advisors can become combatants. On November 12, 2015, the Kurds with U.S. air support recaptured the Iraqi town of Sinjar and regained control of an important north-south highway. The White House has decided to increase the number of SOF teams and to allow them to engage in direct action against ISIS.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. LAND POWER

At the heart of the debate over COIN is its impact on land power. In the aftermath of two long and costly wars, and with a growing national debt and budget deficits, military cuts are very likely. The annual defense budget battle has always been a zero-sum game. Money spent on ships is not available for airplanes; funds devoted to SOF missions cannot be used for conventional ones. With its strength slated for reduction by approximately 40,000 active duty personnel, the U.S. Army might understandably feel as though its 27,000 SOF soldiers would be better employed in traditional roles, especially since SOCOM is not only being spared the budget axe, but is also increasing in size.

The loss of 40,000 regular soldiers does not, however, equate to a reduction in the number of combat troops. The Army is working to increase its tooth-to-tail ratio, so that a higher percentage of those remain-

ing on active duty can perform combat roles. At the same time, technology continues to replace personnel on the modern battlefield. Furthermore, all SOF members began their military careers as conventionally trained soldiers, and they can still participate in conventional operations. Finally, increased reliance on civilian contractors for support functions frees active duty military personnel for combat roles.

The best argument for a more robust SOF component in the U.S. military, though, is that it might prevent the large, costly expeditionary COIN missions critics oppose. Had the United States entered Afghanistan and Iraq with such capacity, those conflicts might have gone better. At the very least, the costly years of trial and error might have been avoided and fewer lives lost. The best course of action and the most likely one for future COIN engagements, however, is to support only those governments that have a reasonable chance of winning and to do so with as small a force as possible.

CONCLUSION

Any study that examines military capability in order to improve it can conclude in one of two ways. It can identify serious problems and propose steps to fix them, or it can affirm that the Army has already found the right path and should continue along it. This monograph draws the second conclusion. The U.S. military in general and the Army in particular have steered a course between two unhelpful extremes. Contrary to the fears of many officers in 2006, the Army has not focused disproportionately on unconventional threats. Perhaps to the dismay of those critics, neither has it abandoned COIN as unworkable. It has instead iden-

tified and prioritized threats, not just by the frequency of their occurrence, but also by the seriousness of their consequences. That assessment has led to the continued emphasis on conventional war, but with a significantly enhanced unconventional warfare capability.

The renewed focus on conventional war fighting has not, however, caused a return to the days before 9/11 when the Pentagon's ability to fight anything but a mid-level conventional war was very limited. The adoption of the new brigade combat team structure makes the Army more flexible and better able to address threats across the conflict spectrum. An expanded SOCOM with an increase in the number of Army SOF personnel improves the ability of the United States to combat threats like ISIS. This expansion has not adversely affected the other combat arms. Reductions in troop strength following the withdrawal from Iraq can be offset by an improved tooth-to-tail ratio, increased reliance on technology, and the use of civilian contractors to provide support services.

The Army also has good doctrine and effective learning institutions. The 2006 edition of FM 3-24 articulated sound COIN doctrine. It drew upon historical examples and the recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although it arrived just in time for the Anbar Awakening and the surge, the manual did not in and of itself produce either of these successes. It did, however, provide useful guidance for a population-centric approach to combating the insurgents. The failure of the U.S.-led missions to produce stable, viable states in Afghanistan or Iraq is not the fault of COIN doctrine. No government can be saved from itself if it lacks legitimacy among its own people. Contrary to what some critics imply, neither the Army nor the Marine Corps have treated FM 3-24 as holy

writ. The two services produced a new, completely revised edition of it in 2014. The U.S. Army Special Operations Center of Excellence and the U.S. Marine Corps Small Wars Center and Integration Division should continue to study COIN and help to improve doctrine as needed.

Finally, the Army has discovered, or perhaps re-discovered, a viable alternative to large expeditionary COIN. An advisory mission of approximately 1,200 (much larger than the one in El Salvador, but much smaller than those sent to Iraq and Afghanistan) proved highly effective in the Philippines. The Armed Forces of the Philippines were fighting a small insurgent group on an island, so the campaign should not be touted as a simple template for future campaigns, but it was based on sound COIN principles. The success that SOF teams are having supporting the Kurds in the fight against ISIS suggests that, while not foolproof, the small footprint mission is the right approach, especially if it is augmented by air support and intelligence sharing.

All signs thus suggest that the Army is not repeating the error of the post-Vietnam era. However, as much as soldiers may dislike them, unconventional threats are not going away. There may not be any large-scale expeditionary COIN missions on the horizon, but the world abounds in a broad range of insurgencies and insurgent-style threats. As long as these threats persist, the U.S. military must be able to counter them.

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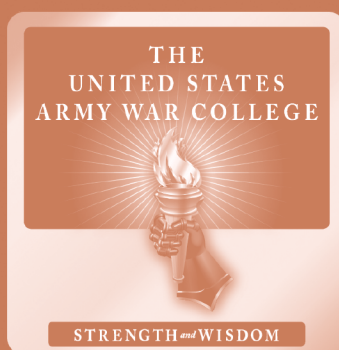
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